



**Family:  
Lela Knox Shanks**

**Artist:  
Ann Gradwohl**

Etched into the desktop of the sculpture, as they are etched into the collective memory of those who seek racial equality, are the oxymoronic words used by the Supreme Court in the Brown decision, “all deliberate speed.” This text is imposed over footage of the August 28, 1963 March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom.

The date August 28, 1963 is significant to the story of the Shanks Family. Mrs. Shanks, an active member of Congress of Racial Equality, CORE, was subpoenaed to appear before a federal grand jury in Kansas City, Kansas, regarding federal criminal charges against her for peacefully picketing outside the Federal Building. The hearing had been postponed and rescheduled by the prosecutor preventing Mrs. Shanks from accompanying her husband to the March on Washington. At the hearing, when asked by the prosecutor what she had been doing outside the Federal Building, Mrs. Shanks answered, “I did what my husband is doing right now in Washington, D.C., and that’s marching for my freedom.” The federal grand jury did not indict her.

Just as the marchers in the video footage continue their pursuit without end, Mrs. Shanks continues her work as an advocate for justice, equality, peace and human dignity. In February of this year, Mrs. Shanks gave testimony before the Judiciary Committee of the Nebraska Legislature in support of limitations of sections of the Patriot Act. She recounted her experience as an object of FBI investigation and intimidation. In text that crawls across the bottom of the video screen, Mrs. Shanks’ testimony of February 23, 2006 is juxtaposed with a letter written in 1961 by her late husband, Hughes, regarding racial discrimination in employment and promotion he experienced as an employee of the federal government.

To express visually a context in which discrimination, segregation, and racial stereotyping and profiling have been allowed to exist, I have elected to use two school desks. Each is painted the color of a common school writing implement. One is the graphite of pencils. The other is chalk. The chalk-colored desk, like our white majority culture, does not face directly the source of its support. This element of the work is intended to encourage members of the majority culture to expand their understanding of the stories of others and to act to make an inclusive and just community through which we may, together, push the human race forward.

Ann Gradwohl - June 2006

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During the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s, Lela Knox Shanks and her family decided to fight against the injustices that had been endured by the country's African Americans. For one year, they held a protest school in their home for their three children and six other students. The Shanks were arrested. Their phone was bugged by the FBI. They received death threats. Mrs. Shanks's husband was threatened with dismissal from his job if he continued with his activities. While he participated in the March on Washington in 1963, she testified before a federal grand jury. "Throughout our 50- year marriage," Mrs. Shanks says, "we continued to work for equal rights in America. Some of our grown children are also activists in their own way."

*Photo: Lela Shanks and Ann Gradwohl*

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